Farming in an Urban County

Agriculture is a major land use in North County, therefore special attention has been given to how to address farmland in the North County Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) Plan. The North County MSCP Plan area has nearly 9 times as many acres in agriculture as the South County MSCP Subarea Plan.

Just as the South County MSCP Subarea Plan streamlined the regulatory environment for landowners applying for land use permits, the County is trying in the North County MSCP Plan to streamline the regulatory environment for farmers while conserving habitat. The County of San Diego has been working with the San Diego County Farm Bureau to address conservation of habitat and farming. Farms, ranches and orchards can contain habitat value for local endangered or threatened species.

The County, in cooperation with the Farm Bureau, is developing a County-wide Farming Program. One of the components of the Farming Program will address how farming can help implement the North County MSCP Plan. Utilizing habitat values on farmlands in the North County can help the County achieve its conservation goals for certain threatened and endangered species, most notably the Arroyo toad and Stephens' kangaroo rat.

The goals of the North County MSCP Plan relating to farming are to:

- Encourage conservation of farming within the Pre-Approved Mitigation Area[1];
- Recognize that existing agriculture often has habitat value that can contribute to regional conservation;
- Support and encourage continued farming in North County;
- Gain coverage for agricultural operations for the approximately 60 species covered under the North County MSCP Plan; and
- Reduce regulatory burdens on farmers in the North County MSCP Plan area.

[1] A Pre-Approved Mitigation Area is an area identified by the Wildlife Agencies for high biological value in which preservation will be encouraged.

Ramona Vernal Pools

Historically, vernal pools -- temporary and seasonal wetlands that often support endangered and/or sensitive species of plants and animals -- have been found in what is now the residential and commercial center ("downtown area") of Ramona. Although about 50 – 70 vernal pools still exist on vacant lots and backyards throughout downtown Ramona, the majority of the remaining vernal pools are now found west of the downtown area in the Ramona grasslands surrounding the Ramona Airport.

For the downtown properties, there is an issue of providing appropriate economic development while addressing endangered species that exist in many vernal pools. For this reason the Department of Planning and Land Use received $75,000 in grant funds from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Wetlands Protection Development Program to hire a consultant to develop maps, profiles and protection plans for vernal pools in Ramona that will enhance California's protection of these rare aquatic ecosystems. The goal of the Ramona vernal pool study was to determine which vernal pools have reasonable prospects for long-term viability and those that are vulnerable to uncontrollable external disturbance so that they could be impacted in exchange for appropriate mitigation. This study has been completed and staff is reviewing and analyzing the results to determine how to obtain coverage under the North County MSCP Plan.

Summary of Ramona Vernal Pools Study

Vernal pools in Ramona have been affected by displacement by human development, disturbance through agricultural conversion and the spread of non-native species. Many of the vernal pools would benefit from restoration efforts, particularly in the downtown area where impacts have been severe. There is a strong potential that these urban pressures may eliminate the sensitive species inhabiting these vernal pools. Preservation of these downtown properties faces several serious obstacles, including high land prices, generally lower habitat values (according to the EPA-study's model), and high ongoing management costs.

The results from the study provided a rank of all the vernal pools in the Ramona area based on our current knowledge of biological resources, surrounding land uses, and proximity to other vernal pools. It is also important to include a representation of different types of pools to assure adequate conservation of all species and varieties. This is especially true of pools on Placentia soils, which historically probably held the majority of vernal pools in Ramona. Accessibility to pollinators (e.g., bees and other insects) is also important to assure the continued survival of vernal pool plant species. Studies have shown that pollinators seldom visit habitat patches over one mile from a larger preserve. The two largest vernal pool habitat patches in Ramona are in the grasslands surrounding the Ramona airport and near Ramona High School (which has proposed expansion of their facilities and preservation of 15 vernal pools on this site). These two sites are approximately two miles apart and would benefit by maintaining a connection in the downtown area.

SR 76 & San Luis Rey River Park

The County of San Diego has been working with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game to incorporate potential improvements to State Route 76 (SR 76) into the North County Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) Plan and the proposed San Luis Rey River Park Master Plan. The proposal is to secure coverage for the highway in the North County MSCP Plan in order to provide a more efficient process for dealing with the biological issues at the time the road is constructed.

On March 11, 2003 the San Diego County Board of Supervisors allocated $500,000 to begin planning efforts for the San Luis Rey River Park. The San Luis Rey River is poised to become a cultural, recreational, and ecological focal point of San Diego County. The San Luis Rey River Park Master Plan will establish the framework for the acquisition and development of a river park within an 8-mile, 1500-acre corridor of the San Luis Rey River. The project may incorporate riparian and floodplain restoration, preservation, recreational needs, and natural/cultural resource education and conservation. Preparation of the draft master plan is currently in progress.

The intent is that an impact assessment and mitigation process be included in the North County MSCP plan to incorporate planned resolution of environmental issues associated with CEQA/NEPA and the Endangered Species Act, for improvements to SR 76. This resolution would include acquisition of lands for mitigation that could become part of the San Luis Rey River Park. Caltrans is considering the following alternatives for road improvements to SR 76: 1) utilize the existing alignment on the north side of the San Luis Rey River and widen the road, or 2) construct an alignment on the south side of the San Luis Rey River.

There are several natural resource issues associated with SR 76 and the San Luis Rey River. The river itself is an impaired waterway and is prone to large-scale flows during heavy rains, as witnessed during January 2005. Within the river and in the surrounding natural landscape exist a number of rare, threatened, and endangered species including: least Bell's vireo, Southwestern willow flycatcher, arroyo toad, California gnatcatcher, and San Diego ambrosia. The potential improvements to SR 76 would have a significant impact on all of these resources. Mitigation for these impacts would likely include providing replacement habitat, noise shielding, under-crossings, habitat maintenance and safe passage between the riparian and adjacent upland habitats.

The primary goals of this coordinated effort are to:

1. Provide certainty and a streamlined process for planning and construction of SR 76 from Mission Road to I-15.
2. Provide a mechanism for SR 76 to contribute to assembly of the San Luis Rey River Park and North County MSCP Preserve.
3. Develop design criteria to protect native species.